

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

[Home](#)

[> Research Program](#)

[> Responses to Information Requests](#)

Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment please email Basesdedonnees.DatabaseUnit@irb-cisr.gc.ca.

7 November 2013

TUR104634.E

Turkey: Treatment of atheists by society and the authorities, particularly in Istanbul; whether local militias serve as informants to the government to report the religious practices of citizens (2011-October 2013)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

The Constitution of Turkey establishes the Republic of Turkey as a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, and conviction, as well as freedom of expression and dissemination of thought (Turkey 1995, Art. 2, 23, 26). However, the *Political Handbook of the World 2012* notes that "Islam remains a strong influence despite the secular influence of government policy since the 1920s" (2012, 1458). Freedom House describes the government of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), in power since 2002, as "mildly Islamic...[with] political instincts that put it at odds with the pro-secular elites who have set the tone of Turkish politics for decades" (10 Nov. 2011). The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) writes that the AKP favours the "democratic integration of Islam into public life" (US 2013, 270). The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012* indicates that "the government provides favourable and prejudicial treatment to Sunni Islamic groups," noting, for example, that the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), whose mandate is to "promote the belief, worship, and moral principles of Islam," employs over 117,000 imams, Qu'ran instructors and other Muslim religious workers but does not employ religious leaders or instructors for other religions (20 May 2013, 2-3). Similarly, a *New York Times* article reported in 2011 that, according to state figures, the Directorate of Religious Affairs employs 60,000 imams and 10,000 muezzins (*The New York Times* 28 Sept. 2011). The article also indicates that the directorate's entire budget is devoted to Sunni Islam (ibid.).

In a 2012 interview with the Freedom of Belief Initiative, a project of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee that monitors, documents, reports on, and advocates for the freedom of religious belief in Turkey (n.d.), the editor and founder of the Turkish online community Atheist Forum (Ateizm.org/Ateistforum.org) states that he is unaware of any reliable statistical studies on the number of atheists in the country but that it is generally believed to be around one to three percent of the population (19 June 2012). However, the editor, who has also published a book on atheism in Turkish (Turkish Atheist n.d.), explains that, in his opinion, the actual percentage is much higher if one takes into account not only people who explicitly reject the concept of God, but also people who reject theism, who do not identify as atheists, or who are agnostic, deist or pantheist (Freedom of Belief Initiative 19 June 2012). The US Department of State reports that religious groups other than Muslims and Alevis make up less than one percent of the population of Turkey and are mainly located in Istanbul and large cities (US 20 May 2013, 2). The USCIRF 2013 report states that approximately 0.1 percent of the population is part of a non-Muslim minority group (ibid. 2013, 271).

According to an article published by Forum 18, an Oslo-based news service dedicated to freedom of belief and religion, atheist opinions "often face strong public criticism in Turkey" (15 Feb. 2012). Media sources report that a 2011 survey on values in Turkey, conducted by Bahcesehir University in Istanbul, found that 64 percent of respondents would not want an atheist as a neighbour, compared to 48 percent who would not want a Christian as a neighbour (Al-Monitor 5 Mar. 2013; *SETimes* 5 Aug. 2011).

2. Treatment of Atheists by Society

In its 2013 report on Turkey's progress in preparation for European Union (EU) membership, the European Commission writes that, in practice, "citizens professing a faith other than that of the majority, or with no faith, continued to experience discrimination" (EU 16 Oct. 2013, 14). According to the Forum 18 article, being an atheist "may not be too difficult if one is unnoticed and does not mind being thought of as a Muslim" (Forum 18 15 Feb. 2012). It goes on to say, however, that "revealing oneself as an atheist and advocating atheist beliefs," even online, "seems to be very difficult" (ibid.). Similarly, the editor of Atheist Forum states that declaring one's atheism may lead to "a strong negative reaction" or "problems if you are not careful about how you do it or where you do it" (Freedom of Belief Initiative 19 June 2012). He indicates that teachers who teach evolution "sometimes face serious problems" and have been harassed and beaten, and that some students have been physically attacked because they did not fast during Ramadan (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Atheist Forum editor explains that it is possible for organizations that do not have the word "atheist" in their name to work on atheists' rights, but that he is not aware of any organizations that are specifically devoted to the issue (ibid.). He explains that people do not organize atheist groups because they fear for their safety and that of their family, or because they are unwilling to put up with the social prejudice and risk of damaging their own or their family's social reputation (ibid.). He adds that the lack of atheist organizations means "Turkish atheism is imprisoned on the Internet" (ibid.).

3. Treatment of Atheists by the Authorities

3.1 Prosecution of Atheists Under Article 216 of the Criminal Code

Article 216 of the Turkish Criminal Code, which addresses "[p]rovoking people to be rancorous and hostile," states the following:

(3) Any person who openly disrespects the religious belief of [a] group is punished with imprisonment from six months to one year if such act causes potential risk for public peace. (Turkey 2004, Art. 216)

According to Amnesty International (AI), Article 216 is "extremely broad in scope, vaguely defined, and far wider than the permissible limitations to the right to freedom of expression under international human rights law" (AI Mar. 2013, 15). It adds that, in practice, the article "has been used to prosecute criticism of dominant beliefs and power structures and has not, to Amnesty International's knowledge, been used to prosecute actual incitement to violence or discrimination against at-risk groups" (ibid., 16). Cited in a 2012 article by Forum 18, a human rights lawyer expresses the same opinion, saying that Article 216 is applied "recklessly" by the Turkish judiciary and is used to punish rather than protect minorities (15 Feb. 2012). The editor of Atheist Forum states that Article 216 is used to "put pressure on non-religious ideas and publications", noting that "the article is worded in such a way that it seems to require that you have a religion in order to take advantage of the protection of this law" (Freedom of Belief Initiative 19 June 2012).

According to the editor of Atheist Forum,

[m]any people who expressed non-theistic opinions, or opposed religion in their writings (books and articles), websites, YouTube videos, etc. were sued and were subject to court proceedings due to these activities in the recent years in Turkey. Many of them had police come to their doors, their computers were confiscated and they were dragged to the prosecutor's office to have their statements taken. Most of them were cleared of charges later on, but this is an intimidation and harassment campaign against atheists and others who oppose religion. (ibid.)

The Forum 18 article also reports on the monitoring of atheist websites "so as to take legal action against them, [which] reveals the relatively weak position of the owners of these sites" (Forum 18 15 Feb. 2012). It indicates that individuals who are not prepared to take on the financial costs and public exposure that would come as a consequence of legal action generally practice self-censorship (ibid.). It notes, in contrast, that there are some websites in Turkey discussing responses to atheism that "do not seem to face any legal problems" (ibid.).

According to Forum 18, prosecutions under Article 216(3) have been initiated after individuals submitted complaints about perceived attacks against religion (ibid.). It reports on a Turkish newspaper's interview with a lawyer whose office is reportedly "actively involved in making such complaints" against atheist books and websites, including Atheist Forum (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In 2012, a prominent Turkish pianist, Fazil Say, was prosecuted for violating Article 216(3) after posting a series of statements on Twitter that were perceived to be insulting to Islam (Article 19 16 Apr. 2013; AI Mar. 2013, 16). Two of his Tweets also reportedly declared that he was an atheist (ibid.). In 2013, Say was convicted and sentenced to a suspended 10-month prison sentence (Article 19 16 Apr. 2013; EurasiaNet.org 23 Apr. 2013; *The Guardian* 16 Apr. 2013). Say is described by various sources as a prominent critic of the AKP (ibid.; Article 19 16 Apr. 2013). *The Guardian* reports that he rejected the conviction as "politically-motivated" and that he will be required to serve the jail sentence if he commits a similar offence within the next five years (16 Apr. 2013).

According to the Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet Daily News*, a cartoonist known as Behadir Baruter was charged by the public prosecutor's office under Article 216(3) of the Penal Code in September 2011 for a cartoon published in the weekly magazine *Penguen* in which the sentence "there is no Allah, religion is a lie" is

written on the wall of a mosque (28 Sept. 2011). Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press 2012* report indicates that one hearing had taken place but that a judgement had not yet been reached at the end of 2011 (Freedom House 2012). Further information on the case could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.2 Other Government Actions

Sources indicate that Turkish identity cards indicate the card holder's religious identity (US 20 May 2013, 5; Freedom of Belief Initiative 19 June 2012). According to the US Department of State, a 2006 regulation allows individuals to leave the religion section blank or indicate "no religion" or "other" (20 May 2013, 6). The Atheist Forum editor states that many atheists have been able to exercise their right to leave the religion section blank, but others, especially those who have tried to do so by mail, have had difficulties or have been unable to do so (Freedom of Belief Initiative 19 June 2012). Additionally, the *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012* indicates that, according to many religious groups, individuals who do not indicate their religion or who list a religion other than Islam are unable to obtain jobs in the state bureaucracy and face employment discrimination in the private sector (US 20 May 2013, 12). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources indicate that Turkish students take compulsory religious education classes in school (Forum 18 15 Feb. 2012; US 2013, 274). According to the USCIRF 2013 report, the curriculum, which is established by the Ministry of National Education's Department of Religious Instruction, focuses primarily on Islam but since 2010 has covered all religions and atheism (ibid.). The same report indicates that non-Muslim children can be exempted from taking the class but that some have reportedly faced "societal discrimination" because of this exemption (ibid.). However, Forum 18 specifies that only students who are registered by the state as Jewish or Christian can be exempted, and that atheist parents "have fought court cases without practical effect on this issue" (15 Feb. 2012).

Hürriyet Daily News reports that, in May 2013, a senior member of the AKP's Ankara provincial board posted statements on Twitter calling atheists "spineless psychopaths... who have been raped" and called for their "annihilation" (*Hürriyet Daily News* 22 May 2013). He also reportedly stated that freedom of expression does not allow for insulting Islam (ibid.). The same news article stated that an AKP deputy for Zonguldak stated in 2012 that "'no benefits could come to society from an atheist youth'" (ibid.). Corroboration on the AKP member's statements could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to Al-Monitor, a Washington-based media website that publishes reports and analysis of Middle Eastern countries (n.d.), the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, speaking to a large crowd of mostly Muslims in July 2013, stated that every resident of Turkey should be able to express their religious values freely and without discrimination, noting that the Quran allows people to choose whether to believe it or not (Al-Monitor 26 July 2013). He also reportedly noted that the expression of atheism does not allow for "'humiliating religion'" (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Reporters Without Borders notes that an Internet content filtering system introduced by Turkey's Information and Communication Technologies Authority in November 2011 blocks access to the website of evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins (2 Dec. 2011). An article published on the website of the London newspaper *The Telegraph* similarly indicates that the filter also blocks websites including the words "evolution" and "Darwin" (10 Dec. 2011).

Information on any militia groups that monitor the religious activity of Turkish citizens and report to the authorities could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

Al-Monitor. 26 July 2013. Mustafa Akyol. "Islamists Extend Olive Branch to Turkish Atheists." <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/islam-democracy-turkish-atheists.html>> [Accessed 17 Oct. 2013]

_____. 5 March 2013. Semih Idiz. "Just How Tolerant Are Turks?" <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/turkey-tolerance-minority-rights-erdogan-anti-zionist.html>> [Accessed 24 Oct. 2013]

_____. N.d. "About." <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/about>> [Accessed 5 Nov. 2013]

Amnesty International (AI). March 2013. *Turkey: Decriminalize Dissent*. <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR44/001/2013/en/2f995e94-75e3-4a73-b50c-28f7e84f46d8/eur440012013en.pdf>> [Accessed 24 Oct. 2013]

Article 19. 16 April 2013. "Turkey: Quash Twitter Pianist Sentence in Honour of Free Speech." <www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/3699/en/turkey:-quash-twitter-pianist-sentence-in-honour-of-free-speech> [Accessed 24 Oct. 2013]

EurasiaNet.org. 23 April 2013. Dorian Jones. "Turkey: Amid Islamic Revival, What Rights to Freedom from Religion?" <www.eurasianet.org/node/66863> [Accessed 24 Oct. 2013]

European Union (EU). 16 October 2013. European Commission. *Turkey 2013 Progress Report*. <http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2013/package/brochures/turkey_2013.pdf> [Accessed 5 Nov. 2013]

Forum 18. 15 February 2012. Mine Yildirim. "Turkey: 'Denigrating Religious Values' -- A Way to Silence Critics of Religion?" <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1667> [Accessed 24 Oct. 2013]

Freedom of Belief Initiative. 19 June 2012. "Freedom of Belief Initiative Interview with Atheist Forum Editor." <inancozgulugugirisimi.com/2012/06/19/iog-turkey-freedom-of-belief-initiative-interview-with-atheist-forum-editor/> [Accessed 24 Oct. 2013]

_____. N.d. "About." <<http://inancozgulugugirisimi.com/about/>> [Accessed 31 Oct. 2013]

Freedom House. 2012. "Turkey." *Freedom of the Press 2012*. <<http://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2012/turkey>> [Accessed 30 Oct. 2013]

_____. 10 November 2011. Adam Smith Albion. *Countries at the Crossroads 2011 -- Turkey*. <<http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/tehis/vtx/rwmain?page=country&docid=4ecba64131&skip=0&coi=TUR&querysi=atheist&searchin=fulltext&sort=date>> [Accessed 31 Oct. 2013]

The Guardian [London]. Constanze Letsch. 16 April 2013. "Turkish Composer and Pianist Convicted of Blasphemy on Twitter." <www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/15/turkish-composer-fazil-say-convicted-blasphemhy> [Accessed 17 Oct. 2013]

Hürriyet Daily News [Istanbul]. 22 May 2013. "Ruling Party Member Calls for the 'Annihilation of Atheists' on Twitter, Sparking Controversy." <www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ruling-party-member-calls-for-the-annihilation-of-atheists-on-twitter-sparking-controversy.aspx?PageID=238&NID=47441&NewsCatID=341> [Accessed 30 Oct. 2013]

_____. 28 September 2011. "Turkish Cartoonist to Be Put on Trial for Renouncing God." <www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-cartoonist-to-be-put-on-trial-for-renouncing-god.aspx?pageID=438&n=turkish-cartoonist-to-be-put-on-trial-for-denouncing-god-2011-09-28> [Accessed 30 Oct. 2013]

The New York Times. 28 September 2011. "Turkey's Elephant in the Room: Religious Freedom." <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/29/world/europe/turkeys-elephant-in-the-room-religious-freedom.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>> [Accessed 5 Nov. 2013]

Political Handbook of the World 2012. 2012. "Turkey," pp. 1458-70. edited by Tom Lansdorf. Washington, DC: CQ Press. <http://library.cqpress.com/phw/phw2012_Turkey> [Accessed 30 Oct. 2013]

Reporters Without Borders. 2 December 2011. "New Internet Filtering System Condemned as Backdoor Censorship." <en.rsf.org/turquie-new-internet-filtering-system-02-12-2011,41498.html> [Accessed 30 Oct. 2013]

SETimes. Menekse Tokyay. "World Values Survey Reveals Important Trends in Turkey." <http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2011/08/05/feature-03> [Accessed 7 Nov. 2013]

The Telegraph [London]. Tom Chivers. "Darwin Censored by the Turkish Government's Porn Filter." Telegraph Blogs. <blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tomchiversscience/100123035/darwin-censored-by-the-turkish-governments-porn-filter/> [Accessed 30 Oct. 2013]

Turkey. 2004. Criminal Code of the Republic of Turkey. <<http://legislationline.org/documents/action/popup/id/6872/preview>> [Accessed 24 Oct. 2013]

_____. 1995. Constitution of the Republic of Turkey. <http://global.tbmm.gov.tr/docs/constitution_en.pdf> [Accessed 30 Oct. 2013]

Turkish Atheist. N.d. "About Me." <http://turkishatheist.net/?page_id=2> [Accessed 24 Oct. 2013]

United States (US). 20 May 2013. Department of State. "Turkey." *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012*. <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208588.pdf>> [Accessed 24 Oct. 2013]

_____. 2013. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). "Turkey." *USCIRF 2013 Annual Report*. <[http://www.uscifr.gov/images/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/images/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20(2).pdf)> [Accessed 24 Oct. 2013]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: The Human Rights Association of Turkey was unable to provide information for this Response. Attempts to contact the following oral sources were unsuccessful: a representative of the Atheist Forum and a professor at Dođus University in Istanbul who specializes in religion and the state.

Internet sites, including: Bahcesehir University; British Broadcasting Corporation; ecoi.net; Factiva; Huffington Post; *Today's Zaman*; United Nations - Refworld.

[Tips on how to use this search engine.](#)

[Top of Page](#)

Date modified: 2014-06-11

The attached reproduction is a copy of an official work that is published by the Government of Canada. The reproduction has not been produced in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada.